

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH HOWARD KEEGAN, PROVINCIAL
RECONSTRUCTION TEAM LEADER FOR KIRKUK, IRAQ VIA CONFERENCE CALL FROM KIRKUK,
IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And who's
joining us now? This is Jack, OSD.

MR. KEEGAN: This is Howard Keegan, the PRT team leader in Kirkuk.

MR. HOLT: Well, good morning, Mr. Keegan, and glad to have you with
us. Glad you could join us this morning. And we've got several folks online.
We may have a few more joining us here shortly. Right now online we've got
Andrew Lubin with ON Point, Dave Dilegge with Small Wars Journal, Grim with
Blackfive.net and Bruce McQuain with QandO. And, Mr. Howard Keegan, the PRT
team leader from Kirkuk with us on the bloggers roundtable this morning, good
morning, sir. Do you have an opening statement for us? MR. KEEGAN: Well, I
can give you a real quick rundown of what we've got going on in Kirkuk.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

MR. KEEGAN: Well, we are extremely busy up here. We've got a lot of
good initiatives on working in many different directions. The security
situation up here is not quite as dire as other areas, so it allows us to get
out and work with the local government, often as five times a week sort of
thing.

The rule of law--

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Yeah, go ahead, sir.

MR. KEEGAN: Okay. Now, we've been making great advances in several
different areas. The rule of law system here is just moving forward at a
tremendous clip. We're opening up a new major crimes courthouse probably within
the next week or so. We've opened up to courthouses recently, with one more to
go that handles more of the general-type crimes. The major crimes courthouse is
going to be used to try terrorist cases, kidnappings, that sort of criminal
activity.

Additionally, there's been -- we've taken the lead on training the
police leadership here as well as jail -- our prison guards, jail guards, that

sort of thing so that we can hopefully introduce human rights into the corrections system.

On the economic side, it's a bit more of a challenge in Kirkuk. The security situation here has actually gotten a bit worse within the past few months, and so the commercial trade activity within the province has probably dropped off by about 50 percent. The system -- there is no true banking system in place yet, so it's a cash-based economy, which is a bit challenging for most people; there's no such thing as normal loans, that sort of thing. But there are a couple of banks that there are agreements with, so at least they're able to do business on an international basis -- funds transfers, that sort of transaction.

One of the shining points in Kirkuk is the opening of the professional and business women's center, and this is a first of its kind opportunity here. It really has allowed women to come in and work together and train in vocational training for business opportunities, and it's also promoting women entering into the political process. You know, women are represented in the Provincial Council and have an active role in government, so it's always good to see more women stepping up to join in this effort.

We are also heavily involved in the microfinance operations here. The Al-Aman Center started in Kirkuk with one location at the Kirkuk government building and has since grown to a satellite branch. And we're going to be opening another branch of this in Tuz, which is actually in the Salahuddin province; that we're trying to create more of the regional-type commerce and opportunities.

Economically, we need to look larger scale than just at the provincial level. We need to really branch out and look at it on a regional basis. There's much more strength in numbers, and generally opportunities -- there's a lot of opportunities that want to come. Unfortunately, the security situation prohibits a lot of it. There is absolutely a ton of money waiting to be invested, but unfortunately, it's got to get just a bit safer before they can do that. We do have incoming investments. There's going to be a new tire factory open, a sunflower processing plant, and also some oil field services. So it's not all bleak. We certainly wish it could be better, but that's the direction we're going.

Services within the province themselves, we're still -- like most of other parts of Iraq, water and electricity are still a premium. I think water and electricity probably average between four and eight hours a day in most areas, so the standard of living, quality of life is still being challenged. Kirkuk itself was a province that was -- it was decimated by Saddam Hussein and his attempts to basically eliminate the Kurdish population. He destroyed hundreds of villages, and most of the infrastructure within the city is crumbling or was never installed. We've got a city that's got over a million people, and there is no real sewage system. And the water system is vastly overloaded, along with the electrical grid. It's in pretty bad shape, so we've got quite a bit of work to do on that.

On the plus side as far as rebuilding, we are working heavily within all the major industries -- the water, electricity. UNAMI, the U.N. operation, has actually fixing to turn over a large garbage collecting operation. We funded and built landfills and waste transfer stations so that the citizens of Kirkuk have something to do with the waste other than just let it pile up on the

streets, and they should be taken ownership of that entire operation in the January or February time frame.

On the political side, the three ethnic grids here -- or the primary ethnic grids -- the Kurds, the Turkmen and the Arabs -- they still actively work in government. We do have a seated government. It's been meeting regularly even during the summer when parts of the Baghdad government took off. We still maintained a quorum in our provincial council, and it's been business pretty much as usual. The Arabs and the Turkmen blocs participate in most of the functions, but during the actual council meetings themselves they've been boycotting for about 11 months, but we've made it a strong effort to see if we can't get them back to the table.

And we've been trying to be influential without telling them what to do, quite literally, so that they work together and come back. And we're optimistic that we're going to get a true unity government, sharing of higher-level positions and actual cooperation between the groups here shortly. So that's probably about it in a nutshell as far as where we're at and what we're doing.

MR. HOLT: Very good, sir, thank you very much.

Andrew Lubin, you were first online. So let's -- why don't you get us started?

Q Great. Sir, Andrew Lubin here from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Appreciate you taking the afternoon to talk to us.

While microfinances is obviously a plus, you -- in Kirkuk, you're one of the major oil regions of the country. Is there any plan to develop the medium industries, such as the industrial gases, welding, pipeline repair, that really kind of keeps a town and a province up and running in the economic revival.

MR. KEEGAN: That has been a subject of discussion and that's been something that our oil experts have been pointing out to the local government, that there's more money to be made in the oil field services. I think the last figure I got was it costs roughly \$11 a barrel to lift the oil out of the ground, so that's money that's on the table. They're looking at it, and we've been working with them to increase vocational training in the trade skills that they're going to need. Whereas Kirkuk has a lot of oil, they don't have a lot of refining capacity right now. So that's a major hurdle that the governor has been pressing Baghdad, to build a new refinery up here so that they can take advantage of the complete income stream that comes out of the oil field services business.

Q And is that a pipeline that they could develop or they could pipe up into Turkey who, by the way, exports oil pipes? (Off mike.)

MR. KEEGAN: Well, there are quite a few pipelines already in existence between different areas. They've got -- I believe it's two major pipelines that are going to Turkey right now, so the oil is moving. And right -- the last meeting I went to had oil and -- not only oil but the refined products that flow back to Kirkuk. Every pipeline was green. There's -- everything is moving along as good as it can be right now. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And following Andrew, let's have Dave Dilegge with Small Wars Journal.

Q Good day, Mr. Keegan. Dave Dilegge, Small Wars Journal.

I think the PRT program is probably the most -- one of the most critical parts right now of our efforts, and it's a long overdue effort. I kind of remember going back a couple years, when the Marines were looking at the civilian part of a strategy for Iraq, and a lot of scrambling around, looking at things like the old COORDS program in Vietnam, basically just in having to go dig out old journal articles, old after action reports. Now it looks like the PRTs right now in Iraq are doing a lot of good things. And I know this might be a little bit out of your lane right now, but I'd like to get your thoughts since you're on the pointing end.

What kind of structures are in place that capture some of your lessons, especially along the lines of organizational recommendations, training and education, to make sure that when Iraq winds down and we have to do this all over again somewhere else that we can really capture the great things you guys are doing in one place and be able to move on from there? Thanks.

MR. KEEGAN: Well, as far as capturing the data, like any other good bureaucratic organization, we have our fair share of reports that we do. We report on these not only weekly but monthly as far as major milestones. And additionally, we've got work plans that are being developed in all the different areas that really specify what it is we're trying to do. And then we basically will even comment on ourselves, whether or not we're able to achieve it or why we couldn't.

The lessons learned is going to be a very tricky thing for Iraq, because the PRTs, despite there being quite a few of them -- I think there are 10 traditional and then 20 embedded PRTs -- the best way I've heard it described is that in Iraq, it's essentially 18 small countries put together. So the PRTs themselves are very unique in their structure. I don't think any two are the same. We work with different types of people in different situations.

I think the most lasting thing that we can do as far as passing on lessons learned is just to make sure that what we're doing we're not doing for us; we're doing it for them. And we are training them to take it over. So in each of these industries or services or government, the best thing that we can simply do is to leave a functioning structure in place at the end of our tenure, when we turn things over to the NGOs. That's going to be the best evidence of what we've done.

And hopefully, as far as capturing it, I don't know how you do that, to be quite honest with you. It's such a unique thing. But I just hope that the Department of State learns that the PRT system is indeed as valuable as I think we all believe it is and that we are getting something accomplished.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Grim with Blackfive.

Q I would like to ask you a bit more about your efforts you mentioned briefly, in passing, to introduce human rights into the rule of law sections in Iraq. Can you talk a little bit more about that in terms of what specific rights you're trying to introduce, how you're going about it, what resistance you're encountering, that kind of thing?

MR. KEEGAN: Well, certainly. Within the -- in normal Iraqi society here, there was no training or anything else for any corrections officers. So we've taken it from the absolute ground up. We've trained all the correctional officers in the Kirkuk jail system, and that training consists of formalized training on how you handle prisoners, handcuffs, the whole nine yards that way, as well as introducing them to human rights, how you treat the prisoners, not just how you incarcerate them.

And we do that not only with the jail level officers, but we've trained a whole slew of other ones. We have judicial protection officers who also provide security in the courthouses and how they deal with it. The police commanders' leadership course is just an excellent example where we're taking their mid-range officers and we're teaching them management techniques, leadership skills, and introducing the officers to what human rights mean on an incarceration basis.

Additionally, there's a new prison project that's currently being developed.

It should be open within a year and which is going to offer 3,000 beds on a regional basis so that prisoners are kept closer to home throughout their tenure or their incarceration, so that they can have more contact with their families because it's not our intent to cut people off from their families. So basically from the ground-up we're just teaching them step by step how to handle people in the proper way.

And as far as resistance, there has been none. I am very close personal friends with the head of the police in Kirkuk province, and he supports all of our efforts wholeheartedly and I know his officers do also. As a matter of fact, the men who graduate from our training programs come out with such a sense of pride that it makes it all worthwhile. The rule of law staff here is very proactive and has done just an excellent job in taking advantage of every training opportunity that's come up, and they've even manufactured some just so that we can continue a steady stream of people who understand how to deal with prisoners and their issue.

Q Thank you. And congratulations on the courthouse you guys got opened earlier this month.

MR. KEEGAN: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Bruce.

Q Yeah, I would like to -- my name's Bruce McQuain, Mr. Keegan, with QandO. I would like to address the security environment you have there. You said that it's gotten a little worse over the last few months. I was wondering what you would attribute that to and what steps are being taken that you know of to make that a little better.

MR. KEEGAN: Well -- (audio break) -- and I'll leave this one as my opinion -- the surge -- we've had two difference surges, one on the military side, one on the civilian side. The military surge was predominantly directed at the real bad spots, the hotspots, the Diyalas and that sort of thing. And we've been very successful in that surge effort, and they've made great strides. But the bad guys basically have to find a new place to go to when they're forced to leave where they're at. I think it's kind of a trickle-down effect. We've had more of them coming up north looking to either relocate here or just to

create additional problems for everyone. Recently there's been quite a few bombings up in the northern areas. We've had several in Kirkuk city themselves and very devastating bombings, and that's a fairly new development to the security situation here. Unfortunately, they are -- it's -- the bombings up in Kirkuk city are politically based. They mainly targeted political offices and that sort of thing with the, you know, local citizens paying the price on it.

So as far as addressing it, I know that the brigade here in Kirkuk, as well as the IA, the Iraqi army, they are picking up the pace. I've heard that some of the battalions with the brigade here are probably busier now than at any time they've been during their deployment to help quell this, and I believe that it's working in that they're actually forcing the guys to not set up camp but just to continue to move on out of this province. I know it's passing on the problem to someone else, but they're going to go until they can find safe harbor somewhere.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred Fishman.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you. When -- I'd like to compile a weekly good news report. For the last two weeks, which project or which significant accomplishment would you say is the greatest effort that should exemplified to the American people?

MR. KEEGAN: Of the last two weeks -- that's a -- (chuckles) -- that's a real good question, because it's hard to compress it down. Probably on the political side, I think we've made more progress as far as getting a true unity government back in place. We've seen more movement over the past two weeks on that single front than we have in months. Again, the opening of the major crimes court -- actually, it should open next week, and that's going to be another major step forward.

As far as the American public getting their -- the bang for their buck, we've got also -- we've worked very closely with the local government on their budget execution, and this is the spending of Iraqi dinars, not U.S. dollars, supporting projects all over the province. And that effort has been going extremely well. The local government has actually -- the governor has stepped up and is acting more like Harry Truman in a way. He's got the motto that "the dinar stops here," because he's reviewing every project before it's actually -- the contract is signed to ensure integrity, which is a real step forward. And he's even had to push back on the Baghdad government to move at his own pace, which is very admirable.

And I really like the fact that we're spending very few U.S. dollars here in our efforts compared to what the Iraqi government is spending. And we're just helping them spend their own money, but they have taken the lead on their procurement, the whole integrity of the process.

So basically the best thing that -- over the last couple of weeks is us being able to kind of take a backseat, to let them do what we've been teaching them how to do.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Any follow-up comments? Q Yes. Andrew Lubin from ON Point, sir. The other day we were talking to John Jones from -- the PRT leader from Diyala, and he was talking about his role -- or he thought that the

place was broken enough that this would be a generational issue. Do you see that in your area also?

MR. KEEGAN: Yeah, I'm sorry. Can I get you to repeat it? You were very faint there.

Q Yes. Yeah, we were talking on Monday to John Jones, the PRT leader from Diyala, and he said that he thought that his area was broken enough and messed up enough where to repair it and make the place viable, it's a generational issue. Do you see that same timespan in your area also?

MR. KEEGAN: Not at all.

I see the -- we have infrastructure issues, but we don't have the same ethnic issues that John's been facing. His area has been very devastated, and the fighting's been so heavy there. I applaud the man for being there.

I don't view us as a generational issue. They've got a working government in place here. They've got their priorities. I think they've got them in the right area. We've helped them develop and we're developing right now master plans for the Kirkuk province that's going to rebuild every major infrastructure and system within the province, and this is -- we're helping them on the designs, but this is their initiative. They're looking in the near term; they're looking at the five-to-10-year range to completely transform Kirkuk, the province, and the quality of life of their citizens.

Because of the influx of Kurdish returnees, if you will, our actual age here is very young. We probably have more people under age 25 than we do over age 25, so we actually have the generational issue at hand, and they're the very people that we're trying to work with to get them ready to go ahead and take a leadership role soon.

So no, I consider myself lucky that I'm here versus Diyala because I don't think it's a generational issue at all. I served in Ukraine right after we -- it became a free country and we opened an embassy there, and I ran into resistance of anyone over age 35 to 40 to learn the new methods and adapt over. And I can say that I haven't hit the same challenge here. The people here of all ages, they want to improve their lot in life and they're working very hard towards that.

Q Excellent. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Anyone?

Q Mr. Keegan, this is Gerry Gilmore of American Forces Press Service. I just came in. Did you -- you're a State Department employee, sir?

MR. KEEGAN: Yes, I am. I'm a direct hire of State Department for about 25 years now.

Q Oh. Career then, career -- and you've been in other similar -- you mentioned Ukraine, you've helped them out with various issues. You were posted there. MR. KEEGAN: Right. I was there when we first -- I was one of the first people there when we opened up the embassy. Quite a bit different situation than here, but a lot of the same challenges in a way.

It was one of the things that prompted me to volunteer to serve here.

Q Okay. What year were you -- would you get to Ukraine?

MR. KEEGAN: I was there in '92, about two months after they declared independence.

Q Wow. And how long have you been in Iraq, sir?

MR. KEEGAN: I've been here since the end of April.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. KEEGAN: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: And anyone else?

Q Yeah, Jack, Dave Dilegge. I have one more.

Mr. Keegan, what's the length of tour for the members of your team?

MR. KEEGAN: Generally, it's 12-month tours. We have (3161/31-61 ?) contractors through the Department of State. They're on 12-month renewable tours.

We're unique in the fact that we have a civil affairs company actually embedded in the PRT that provides manpower support in all of our functional areas -- the governance, the econ, rule of law, et cetera. They are also on a 12-month tour.

And team leader and the deputy -- we're also -- we initially -- well, I was basically on a 15-month tour because I volunteered for it. And my deputy is going to be somewhat similar, but only because we volunteered for the extra time.

Q Thank you.

MR. KEEGAN: Which actually -- actually, I should note that we have an extremely high rate of people who stay more than 12 months. Most of my section heads have been in country more than a year. And most of them are going to be here probably, I'd say, for the next 18 months. That's -- got a lot of dedicated people who really believe in what they're doing, and they're willing to stay over here, including myself. I've -- I will probably commit to staying for an additional year, only because we are -- we do see the challenges, but we do see the good that we can do. I mean, it's -- don't get me wrong; we're not naive or trying to sound altruistic. But there's a real opportunity to help these people. And I think they deserve it. Everybody deserves a decent quality of life.

Q Is your PRT the exception to the rule, or is those tour lengths the norm across Iraq?

MR. KEEGAN: No, I believe 12 months is the norm throughout Iraq for PRTs. It's like John Jones in Diyala. That's exceptionally tough service, in addition to the separation from the family.

So I believe 12 months is the standard, but it's -- trust me, it's real easy to stay if you want to.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. We're about out of time. Do you have any closing comments for us?

MR. KEEGAN: Well, the only closing comments I would want to add is that the -- you know, the American public may be losing a little bit of patience with what's going on, but what we've asked the Iraqi people to do -- basically go from a dictatorship to a full-blown democracy in just a few years -- is exceptionally difficult for any group of people. Most of the people here had no background at all in democracy or true government, and they're making great strides.

I know that too many of the reports in papers are negative and that sort of thing. There are a lot of positives, and it is just a matter of time. And I fear that if we have to leave this -- our mission before it's ready, it'll be devastating for the people here.

The one word that, when I talk to people about the coalition leaving, all of the ethnic groups up here -- they all use the same word as what will -- the result will be, and that word's "chaos." So I know it's tough on the American public and Congress, but it's -- we're doing a valuable service in their name. And I just hope that they can maintain patience to let us finish doing our job.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. Mr. Howard Keegan with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable -- the team leader for the PRT in Kirkuk. Thank you, sir, and hopefully we can speak with you again.

MR. KEEGAN: Absolutely, enjoyed it.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

MR. KEEGAN: Goodbye now.

MR. HOLT: Bye-bye.

END.